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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the difficulty of claims to truth in the analysis of the life of the Victorian feminist, reformer, educationist, and celebrity, Harriet Martineau (1802-76). She was widely known as a truthful person. For example, her contemporary, the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, wrote in 1845 that "her love of the truth is proverbial among her friends, and even among such are averse from her present views." It is argued, however, that predating the ideas of the French philosopher Michel Foucault by a century or more, Martineau recognized an essential element of truth production--that truth is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it (Foucault, 1980). Her strategies for placing boundaries around the truths that could be spoken about her, provide an example of how regimes of truth are created and how social eminence may be grasped and sustained. Martineau recognized that control of communication was crucial to the advancement of her truth. The paper contributes to debates regarding the value of auto/biographical approaches in educational and historical research, in particular in relation to women. (Contains 30 references.) (Author/BT)

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The Truth and Harriet Martineau: Interpreting a Life

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Abstract

This paper explores the difficulty of claims to truth in the analysis of a life – in this case, that of the Victorian feminist, reformer and Victorian celebrity, Harriet Martineau (1802-76). She was widely known as a truthful person. For example, a contemporary, the poet Elizabeth Barrett Browning, wrote that 'her love of the truth is proverbial among her friends, and even among such are averse from her present views' (Barrett Browning, 1845). It is argued in the paper, however, that predating the ideas of the French philosopher Michel Foucault by a century or more, Martineau recognised an essential element of truth production: that 'truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it (Foucault, 1980, p. 131). Her strategies for placing boundaries around the truths that could be spoken about her, provide an example of how regimes of truth are created and how social eminence may be grasped and sustained. The aim of the paper is to contribute to debates regarding the value of auto/biographical approaches in educational and historical research, in particular in relation to women.

> But no one but myself can properly do the most important part – the true account of my conscious transition from the Christian faith to my present philosophy.
> (letter from Harriet Martineau to Jacob Holyoake, 15.02.1855, British Museum)
>
> Her love of the truth is proverbial among her friends, and even among such are averse from her present views. One friend says… "I always was of the opinion that Harriet Martineau was at once the most veracious and the most credulous person of my acquaintance" (Letter from Elizabeth Browning to Miss Mitford, January 15, 1845, (Miller, 1954, p. 233-4).
>
> Harriet Martineau used to say of me, with a show of ACCURACY never accurate which distinguishes her…. (Jane Carlyle in McQueen Simpson A & M, 1977, p. 253)
>
> 'Truth' is linked in a circular relation with systems of power which produce and sustain it, and to effects of power which it induces and which extend it. A 'régime' of truth (Foucault, 1980, p. 131).

I start this paper with four quotes: the first two subscribe to the truth claims of Harriet Martineau ('true account', 'love of truth'); the third, that Martineau made a show of truth (accuracy) which was unfounded; and the fourth refers to the way in which truths are socially and culturally constructed and maintained. The quotes set the scene for the paper, which puts forward the proposition that far from being an advocate of 'the' truth, Martineau recognised that control of communication was crucial to the advancement of 'her' truth. We can recognise this impulse today, for example, in the rush into print of ex-ministers and celebrities, and in the communication management strategies of politicians.

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By way of an introduction, however, I first present briefly the outcomes of a study a decade or so back, which throws light, perhaps, on why anyone should be concerned about Harriet Martineau and the truth. I then put forward some recent ideas about truth-telling, before presenting evidence on Martineau's own engagement with the truth.

I initially began to research Harriet Martineau for two reasons; a request from the Australian feminist, Dale Spender, to rescue Martineau from obscurity for her book *Feminist Theorists* (Spender, 1983; Weiner 1983) and Martineau's work on education and women which seemed substantial enough to provide the basis for a doctoral thesis. However during my eight years' or so work (part-time) on the thesis (completed in 1991), my research focus shifted as I begun to doubt the 'truthfulness' of what I was reading, whether that written by Martineau herself or by her numerous biographers and commentators. Each appeared to take up a different position on the value of Martineau's life and work, and on her importance to different disciplines and to history. Yet, even if they disagreed, biographers drew primarily on the same texts (the *Autobiography* and *Illustrations*). As I worked on my thesis, I pondered on how I could determine who was closest to the 'truth' about Harriet Martineau (Weiner, 1991).

Harriet Martineau as subject of history and object of text

In the event, my study provided a reassessment of Martineau's place in mainstream and feminist scholarship. It focused on Martineau, first, as a subject of research and, second, as an object of text. As a *subject* of research, I argued, Martineau can be understood as a nineteenth-century, female, unmarried, middle-class, writer, educationist, reformer and intellectual, who, both achieved public recognition and acclaim in patriarchal Victorian England, and provided a bridge between the Enlightenment and first wave of feminism of the second half of the nineteenth century Martineau's prioritisation of economic, legal and educational advances for women mark her out as an advanced feminist theorist. At the same time, her life experiences led her to prioritise different features relating to women at different periods. For example, in her earliest writing, Martineau focused on woman as *equal* to man, socially, politically and educationally; later, she focused on the importance of *economic independence*; and towards the end of her life, she placed greatest emphasis on woman as *self-contained*, and as responsible for her own destiny. At other times, her womanhood was relegated as she identified more with Unitarianism, Victorian radicalism, people with handicaps, the intellectual elite and so on.

As an *object* of text, Martineau was examined through the eyes of biographers and commentators, ranging from her contemporaries to commentaries written more recently (including my own). I detected distinct differences, according to historical period and ideological positioning. For example, many writing in the *nineteenth century* emphasised her unmarried status and the extent (or not) of her womanliness and un/selfishness. By the *early twentieth century*, public sphere women were re-conceptualised as unusual and eccentric, rather than unnatural. Interest in eugenics generated heightened interest in appearance and mentality, and the new science of psychology led to speculation about Martineau's personality, sexuality and her relationships with family and friends. In the early *post World-War II period*, greater

availability of historical sources was counterbalanced by entrenched views about the preferred qualities of women. Wheatley writing in 1957 was most concerned to establish her subject as a warm and sensitive woman, somewhat distanced from the nineteenth century feminist movement while Webb in 1960 regarded Martineau as a somewhat inferior representative of an extraordinary historical era. Tellingly, he placed highest value on her writing style and the neatness of her manuscripts. However, feminists consistently esteemed Harriet Martineau highly: as one of the catalogue of great women of the nineteenth century and an important early campaigner for women's causes. As second wave feminist ideas began to take hold, the trickle of writing on Martineau early in the twentieth century became a steady stream from the 1980s onwards. Accounts of Martineau written in the *late twentieth century* displayed little interest in her appearance or womanliness, being concerned, rather, to explore whether claims about her intellectual and feminist achievements could be defended, and what implications this had for extending knowledge about women. This was the position that I took when I started my research in the early 1980s. More recently there has been a concern to promote Martineau as a founding figure in the discipline of sociology, as well as in other fields (Hill & Hoecker-Drysdale, 2001)

As I pursued 'my' truth about Harriet Martineau, however, it became strikingly obvious that biographers' differential assessments of Martineau's achievements and 'their' notions of the truth about her life, were dependent both on individual political and cultural loyalties, and prevailing truth-regimes about women (Weiner, 1996). This could also be said Martineau's own writing, which was clearly oriented towards producing 'her' own truth about herself. Discussion of the latter provides the main focus of the remainder of the paper.

The Truth and Harriet Martineau

I want now to take this line of enquiry further to argue that Harriet Martineau was an early, conscious, producer of truths. Predating the ideas of the French philosopher Michel Foucault by a century or more, she recognised an essential element of truth production - what Foucault calls 'the twilight zone of knowledge' - where control rather than veracity is of most importance. As Simola, Heikkinen & Silvonen put it (1998, p. 65)

> From the point of view of truth-production … the central question is not whether the truth is true or false, scientific or ideological, but how it is produced, circulated, transformed or used. Foucault's…analysis of discourses attempts to illuminate that twilight zone of knowledge.

Thus, Harriet Martineau's *Autobiography*, for example, cannot be understood as a straight-forward, descriptive record of her life – but as a form of truth-production. It is a conscious and judicious production of a linear narrative that is meant give the appearance of truthfulness. The image conveyed is of a fearless, progressive, hard-working woman, who, by dint of self-education, effort and good luck, gained autonomy, economic independence, fame and a long and enjoyable career as a commentator and writer - even if, at times, she faltered due to ill-health or ignorance on the part of others. It also enabled her to revisit and re-emphasise the important

intellectual themes of her life - political economy, education, the 'Woman Question', politics, parliamentary reform and so on.

Yet, as Sanders (1989) has pointed out, questions needs to be raised about construction, selection and incompleteness of autobiographical accounts. What may be left out is also important, as is what to take at face value or how to read between the lines. Moreover, in his book *A Social History of the Truth* (1994), Shapin argues that judgements about what is true are framed by the promotion of certain 'realities' and not others. He suggests we have a 'materialist' concept of truth which gives more weight to the beliefs we attach to the world and less to those of others (Shapin, 1994, p. 4). Such a materialist position suggests that individuals consciously ascribe truth in such a way as to promote their own convictions and to minimise or exclude the truths of others.

Riley (1988, p. 4) argues in a similar vein with regard to women as figures in history, that there are many fictions which derive from the positionality of the designator, and that these need to be understood against a backdrop of historical and cultural ideologies and discourses.

> A political interest may descend to illuminate 'women' from almost anywhere in the rhetorical firmament, like lightning. This may happen against an older slower backdrop of altering understandings as to what sexual characterisations are, and a politician's fitful concentration on 'women' may be superimposed on more massive alterations of thought. To understand all the resonances of 'women'....[we] need to possess not only a great elasticity for dealing with its contemporary deployments, but an awareness of the long shapings of sexed classifications in their post-1790 upheavals.

I suggest that Martineau had these understandings and that we, in turn, cannot grasp the key points in Martineau's writing – in respect of her as a woman, intellectual, deaf person, Unitarian etc. - without being conscious of her own and our own truth regimes. We also, as Riley (1988 , p. 5) argues, need to guard against 'over-zealous' identifications of 'women'. Rather identity needs to be located in the 'more substantial realms of discursive historical formation'. In other words, there have been many ways of 'being a woman' historically and culturally - Martineau took different subject positions of womanhood during her lifetime as we have seen - which evade our propensity for fixedness, for absolute definition, but which nevertheless can be understood if we view historical actors as mobile and shifting within cultural and physical spaces.

It seems that we need a different way of looking at history which can accommodate fluidity and plurality. A possibility is 'radical pluralism' (Sawicki, 1991) which has three main characteristics: a relational and dynamic model of identity, an expanded sense of the political, and an antagonism towards oppressive power structures.

> First, it operates with a relational and dynamic model of identity as constantly in formation in a hierarchical context of power relations at the microlevel of society. It recognises plurality both within and between subjects....Second, radical pluralism operates with an expanded sense of the political. It politicises social and personal relationships usually overlooked within liberal

> theory…It treats theories as practices that serve as instruments of domination as well as liberation….[Third] it challenges hegemonic power structures (Sawicki, 1991, pp 8-9).

I suggest that Martineau worked with these understandings even if she did not articulate them in the same way as Sawicki. For example, she clearly had a relational and shifting sense of identity as a writer and a woman; she politicised in her writing, public, social and personal relations, sometimes all at the same time viz. in her ridicule of the behaviour of public figures in society settings (Martineau, 1877, 1); and she consistently challenged dominant power structures.

In the next sections, I suggest that Harriet Martineau provides an example *par excellence*, of how truth-regimes are created and regulated. She knew how to produce herself and to do so, she needed five key elements: (i) a strong sense of market; (ii) networking skills; (iii) a truth worth telling; (iv) the ability to tell it well; and (v) control over information channels

i. Having a strong sense of the market

Harriet Martineau was an incisive social observer and commentator. She had a researcher's eye and an understanding of social and cultural relations. For example, in one of the first research methodology texts *How to Observe Morals and Manners* (1838), she produced a framework for identifying which social and political institutions were most indicative of a country's advancement. In order to be accurate, she argued observers needed to be objective, impartial, and aware of their own prejudices. This perception of how society works had earlier been evident in her preparation for the *Illustrations*, the work that made her famous. In the early 1830s, she surveyed the political and intellectual scene, detected a gap in the market and did her homework: 'I could never even have started my project but for my thorough, well-considered, steady conviction that the work was wanted' she wrote (Martineau, 1877, 1, p. 160).

Political economy was an influential discourse in the 1820s, as an intellectual response to the rapid shifts in class relations following the Napoleonic Wars. Martineau was convinced that there was a need for a popular introduction to political economy, and that the people had to begin by informing themselves if they wanted reform. She used the medium of illustrative fiction, first pioneered by Jane Marcet in her two-people *Conversations on Political Economy* (1816). Harriet Martineau was more ambitious. She produced eye-catching titles and storylines (viz. *French Wines and Politics, Cinnamon and Pearls, The Loom and the Lugger*) and fleshed out characters so successfully, that contemporaries frequently read the stories for their fictional qualities alone. She was tenacious in her attempts to persuade publishers to take up the series, and even though James Mill advised the publisher that Harriet's plan 'could not possibly succeed', it was an instantaneous, popular success, perhaps because it was both 'educational' and entertaining. In the end, ten thousand copies were sold in Great Britain and America and the series was a best seller, vastly outselling John Stuart Mill 'more authoritative' work.

Even though she never again achieved the publication levels of the *Illustrations*, her many other books and articles secured healthy sales because they were well prepared,

researched, and targeted, accessibly written, sometimes deliberately controversial yet always sharply framed. Her sense of the market told her that, as now, the more 'popular' a book, the higher its sales.

ii. Networking

Harriet Martineau was a competent communicator, making good use of a wide variety of networks. As Richardson points out, 'her political contacts were constructed, sustained and extended by her comprehensive use of correspondence networks, from her childhood to her death' (Richardson, 2000, p. 58). Letter writing was one of the few socially acceptable, intellectual activities available to women in the first half of the nineteenth century and thus was used by Martineau as a means of gaining access to 'male bastions of power' (p.58). Even when confined to the sickbed, her writing flow continued unabated. For example, in a letter to Fanny Wedgewood, Harriet claimed that she had dictated 23 letters within a particular week and had personally written several more (Arbuckle, 1983).

Martineau also drew strongly on her family, religious, political and friendship networks to help her get published, disseminate her views, support her in times of trouble (economic or medical) and take care of domestic arrangements. In the preparation for the *Illustrations*, for example, she first consulted her brother James about whether to go ahead, accepted 'small loans from two opulent friends', used a lawyer-cousin as a witness in discussions with publishers, consulted mother, aunt and brother Henry about whether to travel to London to secure the deal. She used another cousin's 'great Brewery house' as a base in London, drawing on his family for moral support at a time when the prospect of publication seemed most dire. Moreover, when she needed paying subscribers for the series, she approached her 'monied relations' first, many of who were encouraging and generous (Martineau, 1877, 1, 161-178).

iii. Having a truth worth telling

A condition of the establishment of a particular truth is that one believes it so, and that it is worth telling. From her earliest days, Harriet Martineau wrote because she felt she had something important to say – as she herself put it, she had 'the need of utterance' (*Obituary*, 1876). Her earliest writings sought to interpret theological doctrine and her first two articles for the influential Unitarian periodical the *Monthly Repository* were on women entitled respectively 'Female Writers of Divinity' (1822) and 'Female Education' (1923). These themes and others, as we have seen, were much in evidence throughout her writing career.

Another means of promoting a truth is through autobiography. Martineau embarked upon an autobiography several times in her life: first at the rather early age of 29, predating her success with the *Illustrations* and 10 years later during her period of ill-health at Tynmouth. Both attempts came to nothing, perhaps because her main aim then was to recollect her childhood experiences before they were forgotten. The *Autobiography* was finally written in 1855 when she thought she had not long to live. She said that she wrote it out of duty 'when my life became evidently a somewhat remarkable one'. The aim, according to the introduction, was to offer a whole 'from one point of view, and in a consistent spirit' (Martineau, 1877, 1, pp. 1-2). So a key reason for the *Autobiography* was that it was to be Martineau's version and hers

alone. At the same time she moved to interdict the publication of her private letters, which might provide other viewpoints on her life.

Insights into her stance on writing can be gained from her more journalistic pieces. For example, in a collection of letters sent to the *Daily News* on a visit to Ireland in 1851, she presents her work as impressionistic, honest, unaltered and concerned with common things.

> My readers will take them for what they are – a rapid account of impressions received and thoughts excited from day to day, in the course of a journey of above 1200 miles. I have thought it best not to alter them, either in form or matter.... therefore have I left untouched what I wrote, even to the notices of passing incidents as if they were still present, and references to a future already fulfilled (Martineau, 1852, p. iii)

Much of her other writing was characterised similarly. In the case of the *Illustrations* she promoted her ability to promote the truth by claiming that the stories were written rapidly, like letters, and that she never altered 'the expression as it comes fresh from my brain' (quoted in Fenwick Miller, p. 79).

iv. Sounding truthful

Harriet Martineau was extraordinarily good at persuading others that she was a firm advocate of the truth. For example, she convinced the poet Elizabeth Barrett who asserted 'her (Martineau's) love of the truth is proverbial among her friends' (original emphasis), as we saw from a quote earlier. In 1957, the *Times Literary Supplement* commented that seldom was there 'a woman who was so appallingly honest with herself'. In 1990, Sanders similarly acknowledged that the main impression gained from Martineau's letters is 'a sense of her honesty, integrity, and amazing energy' (Sanders, 1990, p. xii). Yet, some did not agree with this evaluation. For example, another contemporary, Jane Carlyle, clearly felt that Martineau was rather more complex than her reputation suggested, at least in connection to her behaviour towards Jane's husband Thomas.

> There is Harriet Martineau presents him [Thomas] her ear trumpet with a pretty blushing air of coquetry which would almost convince one out of belief in her identity (Jane Carlyle quoted in McQueen Simpson A & M, 1977, p. 98)

Like Jane Carlyle, I too am suspicious of Martineau's artless 'truthfulness'. It may be the case that sometimes she seemed not to care about the impact of her writing on others or herself. She mentions a number of such occasions in the *Autobiography*.

> Of five occasions in my life, I have found myself obliged to write and publish what I entirely believed would be ruinous to my reputation and prosperity. In no one of the five cases has the result been what I anticipated. I find myself at the close of my life prosperous in name and fame, in my friendships and in my affairs (Martineau, 1877, 1, p. 199).

Yet, she managed for 14 years to complete up to six editorials a week for the *Daily News*, writing on just about everything in public life including the monarchy, farming,

the Empire, women's rights, education, without attracting excessive criticism. And when she wanted to be heard, as in her campaigning letters against the Contagious Diseases Acts, she knew precisely how to go about getting maximum publicity for her views.

v. Controlling information

As we can see from modern political spin-doctors so-called, if certain truths are to be accepted as true (and others not) then control of information channels is vital. Martineau took a number of steps in this direction. First, as we have already seen, she urged friends and correspondents to destroy all surviving letters (a diktat which many ignored). The reason she gave was that correspondence was 'written speech' which should be protected and bound by the same codes of honour as private conversation (Martineau, 1877, 1, p.3). To her, publication of letters amounted to nothing more than gossip and tittle-tattle. Second, she pre-wrote her own obituary for *Daily News,* which was published on her death and was widely quoted in other obituaries. Third, the publication of her two-volume *Autobiography* followed speedily upon her death, such that occasionally her obituary and the review of the *Autobiography* were written simultaneously.

Despite this, as recent collections of correspondence letters testify (e.g. Arbuckle, 1983; Burchell, 1995) Martineau was not able totally to eliminate alternative perspectives on her life and times. Yet the fact that for over a century, so many of her biographers drew principally on the *Autobiography* and *Obituary* as key sources of information, suggests that to some extent at least, she was successful in retaining control over her image.

Discussion and Conclusions

To summarise, I have argued in this paper that Harriet Martineau was an outstanding social analyst, self-publicist and market-strategist, and that perhaps many people who are successful in the public sphere are similarly skilled. This factor goes some way to answer the question that many have put: how did Martineau, a provincial, plain, deaf, dissident young woman, 'make it' in mid-Victorian society. As Webb (1960) says, for decades her name was on everybody's lips as she tried this fad and that, and at the height of her fame in the 1830s and 1840s, she was mobbed whenever she went outside her door. In modern parlance, she was a celebrity. My argument is that because of her relatively obscure origins and her marginality, she had to work hard to become one of society's elite, which involved, among other things, being known for her candour and honesty. In so doing, she used a number of what we would recognise as modern methods of information gathering, dissemination and control. She was thus largely successful in ensuring that her own version of the truth predominated, and her carefully produced image stayed intact. She pretended modesty, but as we can see in this extract from her self-authored obituary, she artfully implied intellectual distinction. Her denial of genius merely served to suggest its plausibility.

> Her stimulus in all she wrote, from the first to last, was simply the need of utterance. This need she had gratified early; and those who know her best were always aware that she was not ambitious, though she enjoyed success, and had pride enough to have suffered keenly under failure....her original

> power was nothing more than was due to earnestness and intellectual clearness within a certain range. With small imaginative and suggestive powers, and therefore nothing approaching genius, she could see clearly what she did see, and give a clear expression to what she had to say (*Obituary*, 1876)

What implications has this perspective on publicly visible historical figures such as Harriet Martineau for how we can regard the value of auto/biographical approaches in educational and historical research, particularly regarding women. First, I suggest, we need to locate all such work in its cultural and historical context – of the subject in the case of autobiography and the writer and subject in the case of biography. Too many students and researchers treat autobiography (also life and oral history, interview studies etc.) exclusively in terms of the fixing of truths. A recent Swedish study involving interviews has a more tenable position. Mählick (2003) argues that rather than gaining a sense of the true state of affairs from her interviewees, she prefers to see individual accounts as a reaffirmation of identity.

> My interest lies in the *form* of these stories, more precisely how the interviewed… present the stories, rather than trying to explore which story is the 'true' one…. the underlying assumption is that knowledge is situated and that identities are multiple and continuing constructs, which implies that there is no 'inner core' that represents a true version of what a person really thinks or believes (Mählick, 2003, paper 3, p. 8, original emphasis).

Purvis (1994), in contrast, suggests that there are two main ways of understanding autobiographical texts; as supplying *witness* statements or as *representative* of the perspectives of certain social groupings or individuals (Purvis, 1994, p 180). However I suggest that the space between the two may be difficult to estimate. For example, when the noted Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawn begins his fascinating autobiography *Interesting Lives* by saying what it is not i.e. salacious, confessional, we need to be alert. Is it witness or representative or a mixture of both when he claims his autobiography as an historical analysis offered by an intellectual which serves as:

> an introduction to the most extraordinary century in the world's history through the itinerary of one human being whose life could not possibly have occurred in any other (Hobsbawm, 2002, p. xiv).

Interestingly, Hobsbawn's identification with intellectualism may serve as a parallel to Martineau's claim to truthfulness. Both are productions and reaffirmations of identity. Absorbing and illuminating though his book is, might we also view Hobsbawn as a master of 'spin'?

Second, we need to regard actors in history, particularly if they are influential women, as at least as knowledgeable and cognisant of the ways in which the world works as we are, even if theories that help explain their actions have emerged long after their lifetimes. For example, Martineau was an early and competent sociologist, writing a major English language text on Auguste Compte's work (Martineau, 1853) and also analytical and methodological books on culture and society, as we have seen. Indeed, a Harriet Martineau Sociological Society (HMSS) has been in existence since 1996 with the explicit aim of encouraging 'research and scholarly exchange on the

sociological work of Martineau and other early women sociologists' (Hill quoted in Lopata, 2001, p. xvi). Thus even if Martineau did not have the theoretical frameworks of Foucault and others, her actions and writing suggests that she theorised along similar lines.

Third, we need to find more creative and illuminating ways of exploring history, which connect the actions of historical figures to the present day so that we can see them as people who 'lived' in their day and not as dusty, rather naïve participants in an inferior (or less advanced) society. Exploring Harriet Martineau as a promoter of spin has been fun, it is true (that word again!), but it has also been illuminating in the sense that it has revealed talents and perceptions that were previously invisible.

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